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Beginning with Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales," the frontier has been a significant aspect of the American literary consciousness and has contributed to the popular folk traditions of the self-made man, of individual opportunity, and of progress through perserverence and hard work. In the first two decades of this century, the frontier novels tended to be sentimental romances in which the wilderness hero--genteel, aristocratically mannered, frequently southern, courageous, and resourceful--overcomes dangers to reestablish his honor and fortune, then returns to society with none of his initial nobility impaired. In the 1920's the frontier novel moved from romance to realism, from the glories of the wilderness to the ordinary events of life on the edge of settlement. The aristocratic hero gave way to the common man as hero--humble of origin and, generally, a farmer who has come to the frontier to transform the wilderness and create settlements. Later shifts in emphasis in the 1930's and 1940's show (1) attention to the value of hard work, self-help, and simple living, and (2) a movement from concern with individual freedom of action to emphasis on human dignity, justice, and peace, particularly with respect to the Indian. (DL)

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Changing Conceptions of the Pioneer in the Contemporary American Novel

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Like a mirror facing the past, the literature of America effected a grand reopening of the frontier in the years following its official close. Since 1900 many novels have chronicled and recreated the early American drama. More and more pioneers take to the pages to scout and trail the woods, to trap the seemingly ubiquitous beaver, to cross the plains and mountains, to plow the prairies. With each succeeding decade the number of such novels does not lessen but increases.

The persistent interest--perhaps enthusiasm--for this aspect of our past, also amply demonstrated in the enduring westerns of television and motion picture, is more than curiosity in the past, or identification with action, or escape into exotic yet familiar advénture. It is also a reaction to cultural-intellectual bombardment of long duration which provokes a concern for the past as being reflected in the present, a readiness to accept the image of the past as America's heritage from which we derive national and individual character.

This reaction gains its strength and effect from time-honored predecessors and influential intellectual precedent. The novels of James Fenimore Cooper established the frontier as literary subject matter, established a memorable character in our literature, Leathstocking, a frontiersman, who became the model for other pioneer heroes throughout the nineteenth century. Further the Cooper works, widely read at home and abroad, rendered an image of America to their audience. This was the beginning of that impression. A study of

American literature, La Prairie perdue: histoire du romance Americain by Jacques Cabau, recently published in France, reviewed in Le Figaro on October 17, 1966, suggests that this impression both of Cooper's influence and his hero continues.

Before the close of that century, indeed before the last of the vast reaches of territory had been homesteaded, Henry Jackson Turner had formulated his analysis of the relationship between the frontier and the culture and character of America. Historians have since amassed evidence of widespread and many-faceted effects. So generally adopted is this thesis today that it is frequently stated or assumed in comments by major social-cultural analysts like Margaret Mead and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. as well as by ordinary citizens. These comments serve to solidify and enhance the thesis in the receiver's imagination.

Through the continuing treatment of the pioneer, the literature of America embodies this important theme--the role of the frontier in shaping American society and culture--and renders a significant image of the American experience. The novels reflect pertinent concerns of that experience--the search for identity and independence, the lure of the wilderness, the pursuit of progress, the impulse toward democracy; they establish codes of character and morality. The underlying statements composed by the works take on added significance in relation to the residual impression that we are a reflection of our past.

The mirrored reflection represents the view of the beholder--the image of the pioneer is a changing one. These changes, superimposed upon a basic character superstructure built into similarities of plot and setting result from two forces: regional diversity and time, the latter being particularly meaningful in relation to literary trends.

The foundation characteristics outline the impression and establish a unity in the image. Generally typical of the hero at all times and places are such attributes as courage, determination and resourcefulness. Allied with the pioneer's physical attributes and skills, these create the man and establish his success in the face of hazards. In these respects he is usually foremost in his skills and in his strength and endurance, frequently performing Herculean feats. The number and degree of the hero's attributes create the general impression of an extraordinary man.

One way or another the pioneers all want a new country, to head West. They seek independence, a freedom of action based upon either the removal of all shackles of law and custom so as to build an unstructured way of life or the opportunity to develop in their own way to the fullest extent of their ability without the restraints of a preordained social and economic organization. Thus each pioneer signifies a desire for individual identity, a need to separate from the crowd and to feel his own power. Standing up to hazards and

trials, utilizing and developing individual strengths and skills in the process of survival and creation are paramount.

There is in this view general distaste for the settled East, the organized world. Its image: limited opportunity; tameness; stifling, crowded conditions; injustice and meanness of men and governments. In comparison, the West is open and vital, providing opportunities for self-development and independence. Whereas the East tends to soften and subordinate the individual, the West--the frontier--develops his manhood--strengths and skills, permits a man to become and be himself.

Beyond these, the pioneer emerges first as a regional figure: each frontier--forest, mountain, overland trail and prairie--calls for variance in skills and attributes and, in some situations, attitudes which designate changes in character and value systems. Two distinct types emerge: the wilderness-oriented hero--the free forester, mountain man, hunter, scout; and the settlement-oriented hero--the farmer. The proportionate and chronological distribution of these hero types seen in relation to literary styles and social standards of the 1900-1950 period is significant.

The romantic-idealistic tradition is revealed as primary in structuring the novels of the first two decades of this century. Neither the techniques nor the ideals and purposes of realism are to be found. It might have been expected that Hamlin Garland would have made som impression on frontier fiction since his early works--harsh, bitter, direct--dealt with the pioneer. However, his grim, plain portrayal of the pioneers and their lives, his protest and cry for reform did not affect the frontier novels of this period.

These novels do depict a local-color setting somewhat reminiscent of the early realists. Essentially, however, the frontier scene is only a backdrop. Life of the frontier is only shown sparingly: the local manners, the colloquial speech, the plain, day-by-day working existence do not apply to the major characters. Instances when these do as in the novels of Winston Churchill and Owen Wister are exceptions; however, in these the orientation is basically romantic, not approaching the sensationalism of Bret Harte or the direct simplicity of Sarah Orne Jewett. Another exception are the works of Willa Cather, O Pioneers and My Antonia; these, while eschewing the stylistic and topical traditions of the romantic school, nevertheless convey its idealistic values.

As with the other popular literature of that day, the pioneer novel was a sentimental romance. The novels, giving near-exclusive attention to the wilderness hero on the forest frontier, focus upon adventure, danger and romance in the wilderness. Significantly the inherently more adventurous and glamorous forest frontier is chosen rather than that of the

prairie and overland trail which are more associated with arduous travail. The hero--handsome in face and physique, dashing, skilled in the arts of the wilderness--is an aristocrat. His origin is generally wealthy upper-class, frequently designated as Southern gentry. This background is manifested in his face, which somehow expresses his nobility and his refined sensibilities and behavior: social graces, manners, speech. He is educated and usually an officer; he does not perform menial work. In general he is unblemished by any crudeness.

This sense of gentility is not only recurring but emphasized as the hero is compared with other "common" pioneers. Not only is this secondary figure plain in appearance, "crude" in speech and behavior and uneducated, but he generally recognizes the superior status of the hero and accepts a service role to him. The consciousness of rank is further revealed in the machinations of the plot: social class difference becomes an insurmountable barrier to true love.

> [Captain Beverley] could not bear to class [Alice] with the noisy, thoughtless, mercurial beings. . . His heart was full of her. . . His youth, his imagination, all that was fresh and spontaneously gentle and natural in him, was flooded with the majestic splendor of her beauty. And yet in his pride (and it was not false pride, but rather a noble regard for his birthright), he vaguely realized how far she was from him, how impossible.[2]

This aristocratic hero comes to the frontier for rather non-prosaic reasons: he is attempting to regain his lost honor and fortune, thus his status, or he is an officer. He emerges suddenly as a superior scout. (While so identified, a number of these heroes fail to display skills and, indeed, commit acts that appear both careless and ill-conceived in the face of sundry dangers.) In this context he subscribes to the strictest wilderness principles, hailing the wholesome West and belittling the shallow, organized East. Grand in his manly existence, he sees life as complete and meaningful. These patterns and attitudes are about-faced in the conclusion: the heroes renounce their wilderness principles and the frontier. The majority return to the East, to their good names and position, while the others adopt the culture codes of organized society. This sudden shift, brought about by the heroes' regained status and love--the barrier to love diminishes once the necessary status is assured, reflects the aristocratic overtones: the chosen world of gentility and civilization win allegiance, thus being designated as ideal.

Further expression of the genteel tradition can be seen in the moral codes and interpersonal behavior in evidence. Above all else, the heroes are honorable and noble. Women are ideal-

ized and placed on a pedestal. The heroes are gallant and protective, courteous, respectful and deferential--true knights in buckskin. The severest standards of propriety are observed; a rare act of impropriety in one novel--a stolen kiss--brings such shame and remorse to the hero as to cause his self-exile.

In total this hero is seen to represent a societal ideal constructed from several interacting forces. Foundation concepts to the overt romantic structure and values are a traditional individualism and optimism. Progress and opportunity had ever been present in American life--enhanced if not created by the frontier. The impact of Roosevelt's doctrine of the strenuous life was also felt, a doctrine which emphasized the many adventurous qualities, urged an aggressive individualistic strength. The successful conquering of both the Western and the imperialistic frontiers was identified as a reflection of this doctrine.

Residual manifestations of the genteel tradition dictate the hero's gentle tone and noble motivations. The aspirations and expectations of the novel-reading public, primarily middle and upper class women,[3] demanded the virtues, standards and fine sensibilities of the cultured, civilized world. These readers did not want common, ordinary heroes or lives of squalor to be depicted, perhaps being, in the case of the former, too reminiscent of their own lives.

Yet a contradiction of direction exists in the emphases of the strenuous doctrine and the genteel tradition: aggressive strength vs. noble dignity; the self-made man vs. the status quo. The frontier expresses the strenuous life and the pioneer hero its exponent. As the frontier demands strength, vigor, perseverance, it establishes the superiority of the pioneer. The hero's success illustrates at the same time the belief in the self-made man inherent in the doctrine of the strenuous life. However, the hero's characterization is so contradictory and so qualified as to successfully subvert this concept. He is so depicted as to represent a special distinction, a natural nobility, a superiority which sets him apart and makes him elite.[4] He is so closely identified with an aristocratic family background that his progress and success emphasizes the status and position of the social elite. This natural and social inequality is accentuated by the distinctions between him and the pioneer mass. The genteel sensibilities are not jarred then by the superficially depicted strenuous life. And significantly life on the frontier is given up; the hero is none the worse for his adventure away from civilization. This happy ending suggests that the anti-social, independent attitude could not go too far nor last too long.

The opening of the new decade after World War I signified a close to these particular emphases in the pioneer image. The novels markedly shift from romantic qualities in both style and content to realistic ones. The tides of rebellion affecting the literature and other areas of life after 1920 only partially affect the literature of the frontier but the forces were

so strong and sweeping that the floodtides surged around the feet of the pioneer.

The most significant effect, related to the resurgence of realism, is the concentration on the common man, heretofore barred from heroic stature. The farmer in strength of numbers exceeds the hunter-scout hero. On all frontiers, in whatever role, the hero is generally of humble origin. This emphasis stresses a democratic concept: equality. In this context, the sense of independence and non-subservience emerges in a different light. A man could prove himself on the frontier through courage and skills; his superiority and leadership grew out of these.

Everyday life on the frontier--plain people involved in their work, their trials and ordinary events--is brought to the foreground. Dependence upon unbelievable situations, manipulated circumstances and melodramatic adventure is gradually and generally replaced by the intensity of real life situations, as witnessed in Conrad Richter's The Trees and Ole Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth.

Realism is also apparent in the construction of the hero. More practical and plausible motivations and goals are established, ranging from economic advancement to escape from a dull, drudging life and an intolerant father. Fewer exaggerated exploits and a suggestion of arduous training make more believeable the hero's degree of strength and skill. And most significantly, the hero's sense of himself is far from comfortable satisfaction. His aloneness is sometimes lonely; his search for stature, for purpose is neither suddenly nor cleanly resolved. In this respect the influence of psychological orientation on contemporary ficition is evident: the characterization is often beneath skin-level in depicting the inner life and in expressing the behavior of the pioneer.

The pioneer image is not without ideal aspects. The hero is constructed on more earthy qualities. His appearance and character are rugged, virile and directly forceful according to a more modern conception of manliness. In the more recent novels, this rugged quality increases along with a more detailed expression of the hero's physical attributes, paralleling the social-heroic manifestations apparent in the more open display of the body and in the choices of motion picture idol.

Further expression of this shift of values is in the freer morality. The idealization of women as pure, fragile and helpless is replaced by two attitudes: love and marriage are a day-by-day experience associated with practical activities; sex is a natural drive, sometimes a dominant, irrepressible force. The depiction of the stable family-oriented pioneer exerts a controlling influence but there is an increasing emphasis on extensive sexual expression among the heroes.

A major issue reflected in these works is in the pioneer's attitude toward the wilderness and organized society and, therefore, in his conception of independence. The greater proportion initially are intent upon transforming the wilderness, creating settlements, with perhaps some reforms in structure and social life. A vigorous minority, however, want nothing to do with the trappings of society. These wilderness men maintain complete freedom of action, non-affiliation, complete individuality while the settlement pioneer qualifies his sense of independence, an open-end self-development, with stability, law and order and progress.

The issue is presented with undercurrents of internal conflict which project a realistic view and a notable contradiction. The pursuers of progress win out; the wilderness heroes are forced to give way before the inevitable advances of settlements. Their adjustment is not easy nor happy.

> Boone looked down. . . "It's all sp'iled, I reckon, Dick. The whole caboodle."
>
> "I don't guess we could help it," Summers answered nodding. "There was beaver for us and free country and a big way of livin', and everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves and couldn't do different if we'd knowed. We went to get away and to enj'y ourselves free and easy, but folks was bound to foller. . . We ain't seen the end of it yet, Boone. . . Next thing is to hire out for guides and take parties acrost and spi'le the country more. . .[5]

But despite this majority preference for progress and settlement, some pioneers wish to preserve significant frontier elements: its values, its open social relationships, its physical nature. Symbolically the heroine in the third book of Conrad Richter's trilogy, The Awakening Land, plants trees around the town that had grown out of the wilderness, trees she had hated and ruthlessly cut down in her striving for settlement.

Inevitable and dominant as progress is in these novels, there is a strong impression that the wilderness hero is more persuasive, more admirable and heroic. Grander, more dramatic characteristics and bravura activities suggest his superiority. The nostalgia, the sympathy, compelling in the response of the reader, are his.

The novels express particular responsiveness to social trends and issues. In the 1930's a significant number emphasize the value of work and self-help. The heroes call for a return to the land and simple desires and standards exemplified by the pioneers. Comments revile

frivolous living, superficiality, the deification of comfort, luxury, money. Corolary comments negate government intervention.

> "It might be nice and benevolent to try and fix over the laws to help out some poor cuss. But even if it looks benevolent on the surface it ain't good horse sense. . . .I hope our benevolent friends won't tinker up the law to prevent an honest feller from payin' his debts if he wants to."[6]

A weakening of the national and personal fiber is prophesied if the people give up their self-direction. These attitudes are, of course, related to pertinent frontier motifs; they take on a special coloration in the light of the national emergency and government activity to combat it. The novels take the traditional road back from disaster as compared with other works of the period which starkly depicted the disillusionment, the class struggle, the injustices and inequities of American life and demanded national reconstruction.

It is not until the 1940's that the pioneer is confronted with these attitudes on a large scale. Increasingly the heroes speak out against injustice and brutality, for peace and human dignity. They would limit individual freedom of action in keeping with standards of humanity. These concepts are particularly applied to the Indian. Unlike their fictional predecessors and often their fellow pioneers, these heroes exhibit sympathetic understanding and acceptance. They are conscious of the Indian's victimization; they attempt to eliminate violence and treachery, to bring the Indian and white closer together.

Analysis of these works could not conclude without noting a counterrealistic force--perhaps neo-romantic--apparent in the most recent novels. While realistic in structure and technique, these works barely deal with the life of the frontier and avoid issues and problems. They concentrate on adventurous-romantic exercises in the wilderness, creating a brawny, lusty hero--perhaps a modern ideal--who while ordinary is extraordinary. The conventions of the post-World War II freer society--greater physical display, sexual freedom, violence--fashion both the activities and the hero. The characterization developed of an heroic, independent, wilderness-oriented figure harks back to the earlier romantic pioneer.

Throughout the half-century, each generation, each period of social literary change has built its own standards into the pioneer hero. As the frame of reference shifts, so does the image. The changing standards are so represented that the portrait of the pioneer of 1950 is quite different from that of 1900. However, the conservative influences of each period, responding perhaps to the nature and subject of the frontier novel, to the display of the glory and spirit of the American achievement, are strongest in shaping the image so that pioneer

novel tends to be behind the mainstream of literary change and social conflict.

The total impact on the public consciousness of the presentation of the pioneer, by establishing it as the core of the image, is one of reaffirmation of the popular folk tradition of the self-made man, of individual opportunity and ultimate progress for the persevering. Thus the novels enforce the concept of the traditional structure of the American character and national presence as well as the frontier's role in shaping it. They further convey a relationship with contemporary standards by associating them with the behavior and attitudes of the pioneer. This perhaps solidifies the relationship of the past to the present, the traits and values of the pioneer with those of the reader.

FOOTNOTES

1. Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, pp. 101-112.

2. Maurice Thompson, Alice of Old Vincennes. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1950, p. 120.

3. Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas R. Johnson and Henry Seidel Canby (Editors), Literary History of the United States. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949, p. 884.

4. Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943, p. 641.

5. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big Sky. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947, p. 385.

6. Bess Streeter Aldrich, Song of Years. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939, p. 227.